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PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATION OF ISABEL MOREL LETELIER

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Isabel Morel Letelier is a 58 year old Chilean born widow whom I have known since 1974 and have treated on a regular professional basis since 1980.

I am a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Georgetown University School of Medicine and former research psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health. I have practiced psychiatry for 20 years and have worked extensively with North, South and Central Americans who have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

It is my medical opinion that Madame Letelier suffers from severe and chronic post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the assassination of her husband, Orlando, in 1976. Her symptoms include a chronic feeling of sadness and anxiety, episodes of depression, and a pervasive sense of never being able to do enough for others. She also suffers from chronic fatigue, excessive eating and weight gain and frequent headaches. Madame Letelier is a woman whose life has been irrevocably deformed and changed by a single event--the assassination of her husband, Orlando Letelier, on September 21, 1976. Her physical, emotional and mental well-being, her family life, her relationships with co-workers and colleagues, and her connections to her extended family have all been profoundly disrupted. She has been forced out of the society and culture in which she was

born and brought up, and has, since the assassination, felt unwelcome and unsafe in the country in which she has had to live in exile.

Isabel Morel was born in Chile on January 3, 1932. She was the second of four children of a well-to-do family. Her father was the general controller of a paper company, whose president, Jorge Alessandri, would later become the President of Chile. According to her own account, and that of other family members with whom I have spoken, Isabel was "a good girl", well loved by her parents, her grandfather and grandmother, and a happy child - the "queen of the house".

Isabel was a talented, idealistic girl. She started music lessons at age three, attended Catholic school, and was an avid reader. At 16 Isabel went to the Catholic University of Chile, where she studied library science, philosophy and Spanish. Later she attended the Fine Arts School and assumed a teaching position at a local high school. Her life with its studies, good works and teaching, was ordered and tranquil.

At 18 she met Orlando Letelier, a handsome young man with a "wonderful voice", whom she knew as a friend for two years before they became romantically involved. They started "going together" when Isabel was 21. Orlando gave her an "illusion" ring and they became engaged when Isabel was 22. When Isabel was 23 they were married.

Their relationship was idyllic. They studied philosophy, art, social sciences and politics together. They sang and played guitar duets and worked together on an arts program at the law school where Orlando was a student. Orlando was the center of her life as she was of his - He was always proud of the sculpting and painting in which she became involved and encouraged her by telling her that her work was "like magic." According to Isabel he was "a dynamo", always studying and organizing and yet he had time to be "very romantic, gentle and passionate" with her.

Isabel, who lost her first pregnancy because of typhoid fever, had her first child, Christian, in 1957. She was sick during the pregnancy but the baby survived. "When Orlando saw the baby he was so moved he fainted. It was a miracle." Jose followed in 1958, Francisco in 1959 and Juan Pablo in 1961. During this time Isabel was teaching and Orlando was studying and working. After he finished his thesis in law school, he found a job in the Chilean Government's copper department and continued his studies at the university's school of economics.

For the next 14 years Isabel and Orlando's life was intertwined with Chilean politics. Orlando became identified with Salvador Allende whom he supported in the 1960 election. Isabel's world, and that of her four young sons, revolved around her husband. This dependency was rooted in her love for, and commitment to, Orlando, his devotion to her and the enormous

personal strength she found in him: "Orlando was so powerful and wonderful, such a support, such a rock, he was almighty. He gave advice and fortitude, and even in the worst moments he always said 'we will overcome.'"

After Alessandri was elected President in 1958, Orlando was fired from the Department of Mines and told by friends that he "would never be able to find a job in the government". In 1959 he and Isabel left for Venezuela - "My life which had been so calm and quiet was never so again". She then had two small children and was pregnant with her third. Within months Orlando was offered a job at the InterAmerican Development Bank in Washington, D.C. and in September of 1960 he and Isabel and their young family arrived there. From 1960 through 1970, Isabel and Orlando lived in Washington. Though he was often travelling, and she was busy teaching Spanish full-time at the Foreign Service Institute and then at Georgetown University, and taking care of four increasingly active boys, she and Orlando grew closer together. The sadness of exile remained but their life was active and productive.

After the election of Allende in September of 1970, Orlando was appointed Ambassador to the United States. He and Isabel worked together, Orlando as Ambassador, and she as the creator of the Chile Foundation, an international program designed to bring education and medical relief to those in need in Chile. Together

they hoped to help make "social change, equality and reform" a reality in Chile.

When Orlando was recalled to Chile to become Minister of the Interior, Isabel once again moved her family back to Chile. Orlando, first as Minister of the Interior and later as Minister of Defense, was desperately trying to deal with a deteriorating situation. He and Isabel turned to one another for support. When the Pinochet-led coup did take place, their lives were never the same again. Orlando was imprisoned for a year and held incommunicado. Many of his and Isabel's former friends and colleagues were murdered and assassinated. Isabel was frantic with worry about Orlando and desperate to protect the children from the fear that pervaded her life and the entire society. She slept little, had nightmares when she did, and was continually anxious and suffered from headaches. The military government put her under house arrest for one and one-half months. Meanwhile, the family bank account was frozen and Isabel had to sell her personal belongings to feed her family.

When Orlando was finally released from prison, they went first to Venezuela where he had been offered a job. Orlando showed the strains of his incarceration in a prisoner camp and experienced great difficulty resuming his life outside of prison. Though concerned about him, Isabel, with great relief, began to settle into a more normal existence. Within two months, however, they "had to leave." The Democratic forces in exile had created

an office and asked Orlando to come to the United States.

Although he had several good job offers elsewhere, the Democratic forces had insisted that he come to Washington, D.C. In 1974 Orlando accepted a position there at the Institute for Policy Studies.

Through all of the changes in political fortune, the threats to Orlando's life and to his and Isabel's way of life, through the sudden and unwanted changes in location and the emotional upheavals, Isabel had been sustained by her intense and extraordinary intimacy with Orlando. They were friends, co-workers and lovers as well as parents and husband and wife. Orlando was the center of Isabel's existence and with his assassination the center disappeared. Isabel's life was shattered.

During the months after the assassination, I sometimes saw Isabel, but she was reluctant to accept psychological advice or treatment. She devoted all of her energy to her children: "I had to do it myself, there was no point in feeling sorry for myself. I didn't want my kids to see it. The meals were on time, the clothes were clean, they kept going to school. I devoted all my efforts to making a normal life within the abnormality." When she was alone she cried but "not in public, I had too many things to do." She felt totally out of control. "I knew I had to send the kids to school, and I had to eat and I had to live as normally as possible." She was alone and she hid her pain.

As the months passed she "felt myself aging. My mother looked very young into her 70's, but I could begin to feel myself growing weak and tired." She had never had a problem with weight before, but now she put on many pounds. She was constantly exhausted and often forgetful. Orlando's love had sustained her during the years of exile. Hope of his release had made her strong while he was in prison. Now he was gone and would never come back. The irreplaceable personal loss and continuing physical distress and emotional agony were compounded by social isolation, political pressures and economic hardship. After the assassination, many of those to whom she had been closest turned away from Isabel. Orlando's family in their own grief, refused to reach out to either her or her children. Her own family, except for her mother and one of her brothers, were too terrified of the reprisals from the Pinochet dictatorship to provide emotional or economic support. Much of the international community in Washington withdrew from her as if she were a pariah. Some friends sympathized but were afraid to visit or ride in a car with her: "They were convinced that they would be killed." Others, including co-workers at the Institute for Policy Studies, blamed her and Orlando for putting them at risk: "It was like my children and I had the plague."

Meanwhile, there was intense pressure on Isabel from a variety of sources. In the beginning, some suggested that Isabel might have had Orlando killed. Tapes had been found in Orlando's

briefcase which led others to accuse Orlando of being a Cuban spy. Congressman McDonald announced on the floor of Congress that Orlando was a Cuban agent and that he had no doubt that Isabel also was. "I was accused of being a Communist, a Cuban agent and involved with the KGB." Meanwhile she was being attacked by the ultra-left community among Chilean exiles. From the funeral march onwards, they wanted, against Isabel's conviction and will, to declare that the C.I.A. had killed Orlando. Attacked from the right and pressured from the left, Isabel found herself isolated. This situation was compounded when the Chilean Government made her "a person without a country."

Isabel's economic situation was no better. Although IPS was willing to offer her a job, Isabel had to raise her own salary. She sold her house and moved to a much smaller living place. She was continually exhausted from trying to raise money, work at her job, take care of her children and seek justice for Orlando.

Meanwhile, her children were suffering almost as much as Isabel. They were cast in an unwelcome and harsh spotlight. On the one hand they were rejected by their father's former friends (for example, Chris had been offered an internship at the United Nations, which was withdrawn after Orlando was killed). On the other hand, they were judged by people who expected them to live up to impossibly high standards which they believed to be right and proper for the children of Orlando Letelier. They were

criticized for their taste in music, for their clothes, for their hair. How could you want to be a painter, not a politician, they asked young Francisco: "Orlando would never have tolerated it." The childrens' grief for Orlando's death and their rage at those who had killed him were compounded by the pressure from those who now expected them to be martyrs for the same cause. These pressures tore at the fabric of the relationship between them and Isabel.

When, in 1980, Isabel first came to see me as a patient it was clear that she was still suffering both from her loss of Orlando and from the after shocks that had irrevocably altered her life. She was chronically fatigued, suffered from debilitating headaches, was unable to stop gaining weight, and was often anxious and extremely distressed at her inability to provide for her children economically or for those who were still suffering in Chile. Although she certainly had friends, the relationships were often unequal. When they were in trouble Isabel was there for them but when she was suffering she was most often alone. Having lost Orlando, the man to whom she had committed her life, she was no longer willing to put her trust in others.

Over the years, Isabel continued to feel that she and her children were at risk. Articles about her human rights activity inevitably inflamed right wing fanatics against her. Verbal and written threats to her safety and that of her children persisted.

She felt under continual pressure to be vigilant while she struggled to achieve justice in Chile and work for human rights around the world. Assailed by guilt which drove her to work continually for justice and human rights she was unable to resort to activities that might have relieved her stress: The joy in painting and sculpture that had once animated the life of this aesthetic young woman was gone.

During the last ten years I have seen Isabel with varying degrees of frequency. Sometimes weekly for several months at a time and then not for several months. At times she now is able to address the emotional harm that she has suffered and to take care of herself physically. At other times, however, as if compelled by an enormous need to address the wrongs of the world and particularly those done to the Chilean people, she neglects herself physically and emotionally. She grows increasingly tired and anxious, puts on weight, becomes distracted and forgetful and neglects her health and her closest personal relationships in favor of ceaseless activity on behalf of human rights. It is as if she feels she must make amends for some wrong that can never be righted by exhausting herself in the solitary pursuit of the goals that she and Orlando once shared.

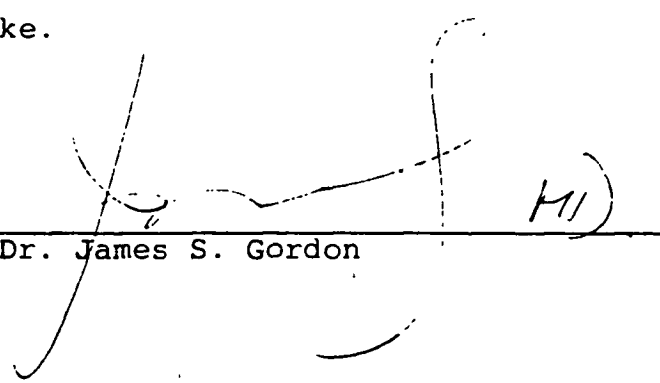
Even during periods when she is able to free herself from this survivor's guilt and take time to care for her emotional wounds and physical vulnerabilities, there is about Isabel an irreparable sadness - for herself and her sons, for the loss of

Orlando, for the ties to family and colleagues and country that were broken forever by his assassination.

The condition from which Isabel Letelier suffers is a post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder results from a particular stress that would evoke significant symptoms of the stress "in almost anyone". This stress is extraordinary, powerful and deeply disturbing. Among its indications are recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event, recurrent dreams, hyper-alertness and anxiety, sleep disturbance, guilt about surviving when another has not, trouble concentrating as well as chronic anxiety and depression. All of these are characteristic of the state in which Isabel Letelier continues to live. There is no question that the loss of her husband Orlando, who had been central to her life, is the cause of this disorder nor is there any question that the particularly brutal manner of his death and its effects on her subsequent life, the threats to her safety and that of her children, her isolation from friends and family, the need to continually confront the political forces which were instrumental in causing his death - have all compounded her situation.

In my opinion, Isabel Letelier will continue to suffer the effects of this post-traumatic stress disorder for the remainder of her life. She needs to continue with regular treatment in

order to deal with the anxiety, depression and physical symptoms which it continues to evoke.



Dr. James S. Gordon

Dated:

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